

Woolston.

A blind girl's education.

HV1626 W



M.C. MIGEL LIBRARY
AMERICAN PRINTING
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

A BLIND GIRL'S EDUCATION

ROBERT W. WOOLSTON

W ANY years ago I had the pleasure of visiting in a beautiful farm home, and now note with interest the changes that have taken place in that family with the passing years.

At the time of my visit the family consisted of the father, a fine, successful business man, the mother, devoted to her home and family, two husky lads of nine and seven years of age, respectively, and two beautiful little girls, five and three years old.

A guest entering that home would notice at once the devotion of the entire family to the little brown-eyed girl of five years. It would seem that they, the family, anticipated and administered her every want. She was not ill, yet her baby sister brought her a drink of water and fondled and petted her as she sat on her mother's lap. The mother stood the little girl on the floor and asked her to come over and speak to me. She walked toward me with outstretched hands, showing that she was afraid of falling or getting hurt. She was blind. The older brother came to her assistance. The mother explained that her little daughter was blinded by accident in infancy, and her oculist had advised her that the little girl could never see again.

Four years prior to that time the little girl, then a babe one year of age, fell on a toy with which she was play-

ing. Inflammation first blinded the injured eye. Had the injured eye been removed it is probable that the vision of the uninjured eye would have remained unimpaired, but the eye was not removed and, sad to state, the inflammation destroyed the vision in both eyes. In an accident like this, the parents should rely wholly on the advice of a competent oculist and consent to have the operation performed at once. This little girl, Ruth by name, could not remember ever seeing. She was, indeed, like a hothouse plant in her family. She was not permitted to do anything for herself, everything was done for her, but the time was not far away when, of necessity, the situation in the family circle must change, and the very kindnesses and loving care resulted in a real hardship for her. Her brothers and sister romped and played in the fields and meadows, they had their pets among the stock on the farm, they had their kites and sleds and ponies. The boys rode their ponies to school, two miles distant.

When the very active lives of these hearty farm children were contrasted with the listless, inactive one of the little blind sister, the seriousness of the affliction was more keenly felt. She was not taught to run and play and laugh and sing. Every movement seemed to be restricted and the real joy of childhood repressed. The time came all too soon when the younger

sister started to school. These little children rode away in a cart to school early in the morning. To shorten a lonely day, Ruth was permitted and encouraged to lie in bed until ten o'clock in the morning. At rising time the devoted mother would dress Ruth and feed her her breakfast.

The family had never seen another blind child; they did not know that Ruth could be taught to dress herself, to go through the house unaided, to assist with the housework, to skip and play and enjoy outdoor life. She wondered why she could not ride the pony, why she could not go to school, why she was not like the other children. What did it mean to see? How many hours she sat alone, afraid to move about, yet every muscle tense with pent up energy. How much she should have been learning during those first seven years of her life. Her parents should have given her just the same treatment that they gave the other children.

The parents often spoke of this afflicted child. How dear she was to them. They prayed that her vision might be restored and they worked hard to provide for her future. The greatest assurance for this child's future would have been a careful training, the result of which would have been resourcefulness and capability, the same resourcefulness that was manifest in the other children. Careful, painstaking training would have brought this child's intelligence to the foreground, and her affliction would have become less and less noticeable. But, as these seven years passed, the parents noticed that Ruth was not as interesting to friends and neighbors as

in former days. It then occurred to them that it was the child that was acquiring something each day of the year, who had something of interest to say and to give out to others, who was alert of mind, that attracted and held attention and made friends. So they saw that their afflicted child, though growing in years, was losing ground. The three other children, engaged in their own activities, the chores on the farm, and school work and play, were perhaps not less in sympathy with their sister, but very much less attentive to her. The mother and father were too busy with the many farm duties to give her the usual attention or to answer her numerous questions.

As I think of this little girl, unable to engage in any of the activities of the home or the farm or the school, alone so much, the words of Helen Keller came to my mind: "The great burden of the blind is not blindness, but idleness."

If parents of blind children could realize how much early training means to make the afflicted child normal in appearance and behavior, and capable of filling a useful little niche in the household, thus alleviating the sorrows of the whole family, no effort would be spared in this early education. How wholesome it always sounds to hear a blind child talking about the birds, flowers and trees, about the fruit and the vegetables and farm products, his whole mind filled with the environment in which he has lived. He does not have to see all these things with the physical eyes to enjoy and appreciate them. He is certain that they are

around about him and his mind is alert even though his eyes are blind.

II

The parents were strong and courageous enough to face the inevitable. Training, education, now became the paramount subject in the family. Where and how could Ruth be taught? a letter finally came to the State School for the Blind in Jacksonville, Illinois, stating that Ruth would enter the school the following September. The day for opening the school term arrived and with it came Ruth and her father and mother. She was delighted with all the excitement of her first day in school. She was shown to her room and met her little roommates, met her teachers, was shown the equipment of the classroom. Everything, of course, was new to her, the time passed quickly and the hour for her parents' departure came all too soon, but she, like them, had prepared for the parting hour.

The following morning found her in the classroom, where her teacher acquainted her with many objects which surrounded her.

Her education must be obtained through the sense perception of her finger tips. How interesting she was, how willing and eager to learn. On the farm she had been surrounded by many birds and had heard them sing, but she could not imagine how they appeared. She began to examine mounted birds, to learn their sizes, colors, forms and weights. She was shown how they could run and hop and how they could spread their wings and sail through the air. As her little fingers passed over the forms of these mount-

ed birds, her face beamed with real satisfaction. She was now learning things that she had wondered about so long. If there is one subject that interests little children, especially little blind children, more than any other it is birds. The fact that they cannot see them does not lessen their desire to know all about them. On the schoolgrounds and in the parks they learn to distinguish the various kinds of birds by their songs. Blind children depend on the sense of hearing to a far greater extent than sighted children and thus hear many bird songs that escape the ears of sighted children. Ruth was introduced first to the subject of birds because her teacher, experienced in teaching blind children, knew that it would be of greatest interest to her.

How barren must be the mind of a child that has not had access to the many beautifully colored picture books! Can we wonder then that Ruth was continually asking questions about all the domestic and wild animals? The weeks have now passed and each day the sense perception of her finger tips has become keener and more capable.

After learning many birds she turned to a large group of mounted animals, both wild and domestic, examining first the least animals, like the mouse, rat, squirrel, chipmunk, rabbit, monkey, and coon, until she had reached the largest, like the lion and elephant. All were mounted. Later she examined the larger ones in miniature form. How do we know that she formed the correct image? An oral examination determined that to a certain extent. To further impress the picture of these animals upon her mind she was requir-

ed to model each animal in clay; this, of course, was the best test as to the accuracy of the child's images.

Many minerals were laid before her. As she learned the name of each, its usefulness was explained. Samples of various kinds of grain were given her in little boxes and she soon became familiar with all.

Months have passed and yet Ruth's picture book of mounted birds, mounted domestic and wild animals, fish, flowers, fruits and grains, which she has been "seeing" with her fingers, still lies opened before her with much more in store for her hungry mind.

Objective instruction aroused her interest in everything around her. It stimulated her desire to read, herself, instead of having her teacher read for her.

Vacation came. Ruth looked forward to going home to see her family and the members of her family counted the days as anxiously as she did. On the closing day of the term, both her father and mother came to the school to accompany her home. What a joyful meeting, filled with tears and laughter! Could it be Ruth? How she had grown!

How fast time flies and how fast children grow. The summer on the farm, romping and playing with her brothers and sister, was only a pleasant memory and my pupil was back at her desk in the classroom. Her delicate, sensitive fingers have learned to read Braille, which is a system of raised dots by which blind children are educated. Did she learn it quickly? No. Did it require patience? Yes, much care and patience were exercised. With the tips of her fingers she was required to determine the letters of the

alphabet, each of which is a particular combination of tiny raised dots not larger than a pin head. This Braille system was the foundation of her education and it paid to be careful and patient. At last it was learned and then came that great satisfaction of acquiring knowledge from story books. She learned to spell all the names of her dumb mounted pets, birds and animals.

But Ruth must tell her family at home on the farm many of the incidents of her school life. And with reading and spelling she was taught to write Braille. This she did with a slate and stylus. Her family could not read Braille but her teacher interlined the letters in script and by this method the family and pupil were kept in direct touch with one another.

After reading, writing and spelling came the numerals. To learn them was not difficult for the numbers in Braille are made by letters of the alphabet with the numeral sign preceding them. Then came the introduction of arithmetic. Wooden blocks of different kinds and sizes and geometrical figures were given and used to good advantage. The work was, at first, like play, but later it became real work.

Must our pupil always ask someone else what time it is because she cannot see? Independence of action, self-reliance, like that of her brothers and sister, were Ruth's ambition and delight and now she must learn to tell the time of day. She had learned the numerals. The Braille numerals from one to twelve were placed on the face of the clock. She was taught that the minute hand moved from twelve to twelve while the hour hand moved from

twelve to one to make an hour. She could easily feel the Braille numerals on the face of the clock. She learned the hours and minutes exactly. Then, from time to time the size of the clock's face was diminished and the lessons repeated. Then she was given a watch with the crystal removed having the Braille numerals instead of the Roman. Her wrist watch became her friend that told her the time of day. The cultivation of a delicate sense perception is to the blind what keen sight is to the sighted person.

Now, with a knowledge of her environment, a familiarity with things and their use, able to read, write and work arithmetic, what was to hinder her from being educated?

Her text books in Braille corresponded to those in print used by her brothers and sister and they often compared stories. Among children's great heroes in this country are Washington, Lincoln and Grant. Children at home talked much about the pictures of these great statesmen. Our little blind girl, of course, could not see them. The busts of these national heroes stood in her classroom. She studied their features carefully, line by line, until she could give a very clear description of each. We cannot say how accurate her mental images of them were, but it is evident that she felt she had seen them and, therefore, knew them better.

Every lesson that she learned made the next one easier. The early sense perception lessons in the primary school were the foundation for her courses in geography, typewriting geometry and handwork. Through several years of her elementary education she depended, to a great extent,

on sense perception. She would stand by the relief maps and globes, outline the countries of the earth, locate their principal cities, trace mountains, lakes and rivers. She would supplement this knowledge by use of Braille text books in geography. I believe that her knowledge in various subjects was equivalent to that of sighted girls in parallel grades. All her map work in geography brought into use her early training in sense perception. She found great satisfaction in her ability to step up to a map or a globe and locate the point under discussion in the classroom. Each preceding lesson requiring carefully trained fingers was an asset to her now.

The early sense perception training with flowers, grains, vegetables, birds, animals, and busts, which was so pleasant and fascinating, was for a greater purpose than mere pleasure. It was the beginning of co-ordination of hand and mind. It was very essential as it was the foundation of a system by which she was to develop her mind throughout life.

I would not have my readers think that Ruth's education was easy and delightful from first to last. Passing from the objective lessons to the abstract, and reading many books in Braille, required much time and patience and labor on her part. Her training in the elementary school was very much like that of her brothers' and sister's at home, her course of study and the length of time required to accomplish it were just the same.

With each summer vacation the family realized that their little girl's affliction was less noticeable, that she had things in common with the rest of the family. In the mornings she was up

bright and early, dressed herself and went down to breakfast with the other children. In school she had learned to measure space and distances. She had gone by herself from building to building on the school grounds and now at home she went from room to room in the house, enjoyed the beautiful lawn, moved about, not dependent, but independently.

Her healthy, optimistic view of life, though still a little girl, has greatly lightened the sorrow which blindness brings to the family.

This little girl supplemented her elementary academic course with a thorough course in home economics. She learned to sew, crochet, knit, make baskets and weave beautiful fine fabrics. When her books were laid aside her fingers could still be busily engaged. All these things added to her accomplishments and gave her poise. She was careful with reference to her manners and particularly about her table etiquette. She said that it was at the dinner table that people judged her as either an accomplished or an unaccomplished girl.

Eight years had passed, Ruth had reached her fifteenth year and completed the work in the elementary school. During these years she had had three lessons each week in Physical Culture. She had learned to walk well and with assurance, to sit erect, to hold her head up, to listen with attention and to appear as though she were not blind. Through the use of Indian clubs, dumb bells, wands, parallel bars and other gymnastic equipment she became alert and natural in her movements and appearance.

She now entered upon the four year

high school course in the School for the Blind, supplementing it with a course in piano. She was anxious to become a typist, and so typewriting was one of the subjects which she carried through her entire high school course, giving forty minutes to it each day. The piano lessons and typewriting lessons were each an aid to the other. It was not long before she was able to prepare her English and History lessons in type rather than Braille; this lightened the teachers' work and at the same time gave Ruth splendid experience practicing on the L. C. Smith typewriter, using the touch system on the regular keyboard as do sighted stenographers. The Braille letters which she had been mailing home each week were discontinued and now very nice typewritten letters took their place. It may be stated here that Ruth, through her painstaking typewriting course, was building better than she knew.

Her early sense perception training proved to be invaluable to her all through school, but nowhere did she appreciate its importance more than in plane geometry. Her high school course was built on the subjects required for college entrance and plane geometry was one of them that brought into use considerable ingenuity. It was her task to construct in raised lines the geometrical figures. This she did by first learning the theorem and forming the image in her mind. Then by the use of a pattern tracer she embossed the figures, lettered the angles, traced the lines and gave the oral solution of the problem. Perhaps geometry, algebra and Latin were her most difficult subjects. Her four years of High School English

were afterwards put into telling and practical use, a use quite different from college pre-requisites as she had anticipated. General Science, History, Civics and Economics all had their cultural value.

At nineteen years of age she had completed her course and was graduated from high school. Two years previous to that time her father on the farm, like many a farmer after the world war, had met with serious business reverses. Gradually it had been impressed upon her mind that she must not look to him for a college education; in fact, straitened circumstances gave him much concern regarding his daughter's future. Since she could not afford to go to college, she was invited to return to the School for the Blind to pursue a Post-Graduate course in Dictaphone Operating. Being a good speller and a splendid typist already, this course was not difficult. She applied herself to this work in connection with Business English for one year and was ready for a Dictaphone position.

III

We shall not soon forget with what great joy she and her friends in the school received the news that a firm in Peoria, Illinois, would give her a position in its Dictaphone Department. She eagerly accepted the offer (realizing her limited opportunities) and was in the Peoria office at the time fixed by her employer. All her friends in the school were saying what a fortunate girl Ruth was to have such a good job. But only two days later a telegram was received from her firm, asking us to meet her at the train in Jack-

sonville. What a sad, depressed, dejected girl we met. I shall never forget the pathetic expression of that blind girl as she stepped from the train. Tears came to her eyes as she told us that she had lost her job. No one had the heart to ask her for an explanation. We walked from the train to the school in silence, feeling certain that the fault did not lie with our once courageous, faithful student.

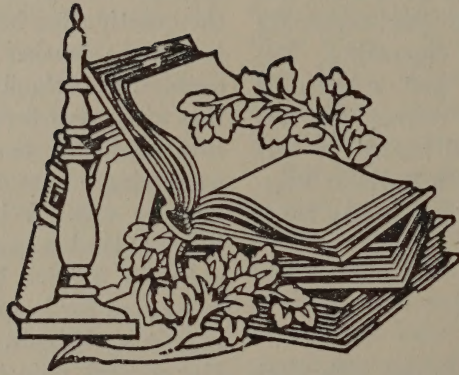
A letter was received the following morning from the Peoria firm stating that Ruth was a good Dictaphone operator and that her work during those two days was satisfactory in every respect, but that the man who had employed her had neglected to state that she would need to do filing as well as typing. Filing, of course, was out of the question for her. In its endeavor to place a number of Dictaphone operators, the school had made application with many firms in Illinois. Ruth continued her course, working and practicing constantly and waiting for another call. Within a short time, through the businesslike solicitation of a Social Service Worker, a position was found for her with a splendid firm in Alton, Illinois. She made good. Her careful, painstaking work pleased her employer and her typing was often shown with much pride to men who visited his office, saying: "This work was done by a young lady who is totally blind". She has remained in that position for five years, and at the end of each week, during all those years, she has received a check for twenty-five dollars. She has lived in the Y. W. C. A. not far from her employment where she has many friends. She has been a very active church worker. Her knowledge of music and

her ability to play the piano have assisted her socially.

Blindness is a handicap, but it is not an insurmountable one. This young lady has done as well, if not better, than the other children in the

family. Since leaving school she has earned her own livelihood and saved money besides.

This is the story of Ruth's accomplishments and also the story of many other blind girls like her.





A lesson in sense perception
Illinois School for the Blind.



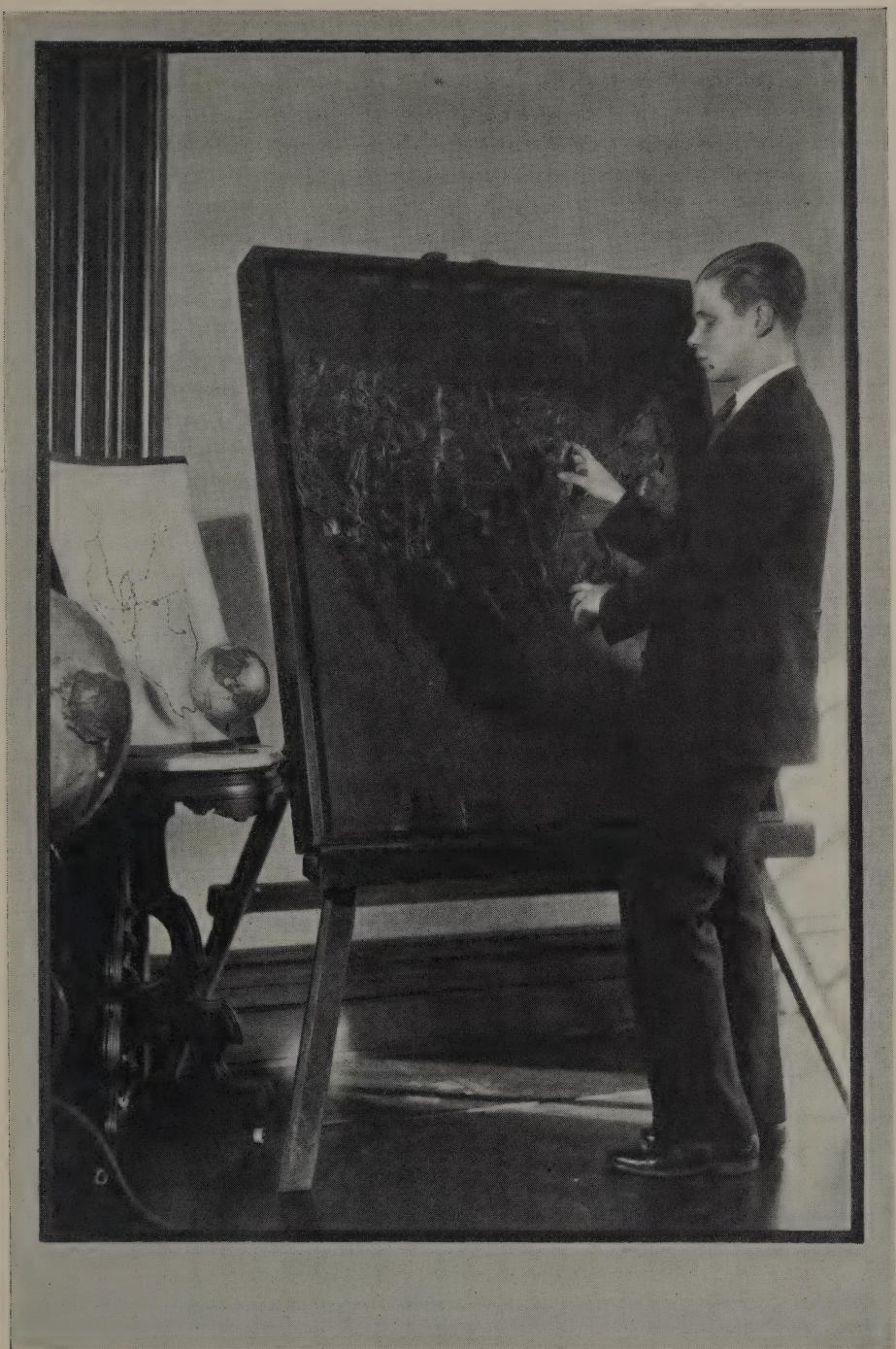
Reading her English literature lesson
Illinois School for the Blind.



Getting acquainted with birds
Illinois School for the Blind.



A lesson in American history
Illinois School for the Blind.



A lesson in geography
Illinois School for the Blind.



Learning to tell the time of day
Illinois School for the Blind.



Dictaphone operating
Illinois School for the Blind.



Getting acquainted with animals
Illinois School for the Blind.

Photomount
Pamphlet
Binder
Gaylord Bros., Inc.

Makers
Syracuse, N. Y.
PAT. JAN 21, 1908

